

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 132

CG 019 897

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TITLE Teen Pregnancy Prevention: Grassroots Efforts in Orange County.
PUB DATE 26 Apr 87
NOTE 5p.; Paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Psychological Association (67th, Long Beach, CA, April 23-26, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Community Education; *Early Parenthood; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Participation; *Pregnancy; *Sex Education; Sexuality
IDENTIFIERS California (Orange County); *Coalition Concerned with Adolescent Pregnancy

ABSTRACT

In 1979, a March of Dimes task force investigation in Orange County, California found a direct correlation between the rising number of low birth weight babies and the rising number of births to teens. Sparked by this investigation, the Coalition Concerned with Adolescent Pregnancy (CCAP), an independent non-profit agency, was formed. CCAP's community education and networking strategies include a multidimensional approach involving youth, parents, and youth-serving professionals from clergy to community clinics. Unique programs in the Hispanic community have been successful in encouraging parental involvement with the sexuality education of their children. Successful parent education programs in the Anglo community have stressed the importance of family communication about sexuality and healthy growth and development. Topics stressed in educational presentations to adolescents include sexual decision-making skills, values and goals clarification, communication skills, sexuality and sex roles, the impact of the media on sexual values and beliefs, and the consequences of teenage pregnancy. These topics were chosen to complement the basic education teenagers receive in human reproduction issues. The underlying assumption is that adolescents who receive a broad knowledge base about human sexuality and relationships along with life planning skills, encouragement to save sex for later, and community support in accessing needed services (from job training to birth control) will be able to avoid the problems of teenage pregnancy and too-early childbearing. (NB)

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Text of speech by
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as a participant in

Grass Roots Prevention: Applications of a Growing Knowledge Base
A Symposium

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WESTERN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
67TH ANNUAL CONVENTION

Sunday, April 26, 1987
Long Beach, California

TEEN PREGNANCY PREVENTION: GRASSROOTS EFFORTS IN ORANGE COUNTY

The idea that became the Coalition Concerned with Adolescent Pregnancy (also known by its acronym, CCAP), was sparked by a 1979 March of Dimes task force investigating the rising number of low birth weight babies in Orange County. The investigators saw a direct correlation between the rising number of low birth weight babies and the rising number of births to teens decided that it was time that Orange County did something about its teen pregnancy problem. Since our grass roots beginning in 1979 as a small group of volunteers working to awaken the community to the problems of teen pregnancy, CCAP has become a viable force in the county as an independent non-profit information and education agency now funded by memberships and public and private grants. A small professional staff is responsible for CCAP's core programs, but a volunteer board of directors and community speakers bureau are still central to the CCAP organization.

One of CCAP's primary goals has always been to bring members of the community together to work collectively on the problems we all face. A year ago we accelerated this effort with the creation of the Orange County Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Network, a true coalition of youth-serving agencies and individuals from throughout the county and administrated by CCAP. At our first meeting we asked participants representing over 40 different agencies and individuals to help us brainstorm a model for the primary prevention of unintended adolescent pregnancy in our county. The model that was developed as a result of that first meeting calls for action at several levels within the community, and includes: knowledge for personal growth and development, life skills training and opportunities, health education and health care, psychological support, parental support, and community support. It assumes taht teen pregnancy requires a multidimensional solution requiring broad based community participation.

The network is about to embark on its first community action project: Adolescent Pregnancy Childwatch (APCW). The project will be orchestrated by the Orange County Junior League but will be carried out through cooperative efforts of several community

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organizations. APCW has been developed by the (national) Children's Defense Fund for use in communities across the United States. "Childwatch" is a three stage project involving local data collection and needs assessment, followed by recommendations for county-wide action, and finally, with the implementation of improved and/or new programs to meet the needs of local youth. The primary prevention model that our network has already developed will provide the focus for Childwatch and because this model which supports and is supported by Childwatch was developed by the community, believe that the Childwatch project will be very successful in Orange County. I have to add, that one of the really great benefits that has come from the formation of this coalition is that those of us working day in and day out with the problems of teen pregnancy, with ignorance and political games-playing in a politically conservative county, have been heartened to meet with our "competitors" in other youth-serving agencies and to learn that we not only share common goals but that we can also share resources and learn from and be strengthened by each other. And we can see how our part of the solution to the problems of teen pregnancy fits into the larger effort. Our motto is: Together we can make a difference!

Another exciting project that we're involved in is our "Comadres" project in the Hispanic community. "Comadres" are women in the community who function as sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth educators on an informal basis to the other women in their social networks. From these comadres we learn the beliefs, attitudes and health practices regarding family planning, pregnancy, and parenting of the Hispanic community. This information will be shared with health professionals that serve the Hispanic community to help them better understand and serve their clients. And hopefully, the comadres and some of the health professionals will be able to form an on-going network where they can continue to learn from one another. We have also managed to create considerable interest among Hispanic parents in parenting workshops on topics including: communication about sexuality, establishing rules and limits, and understanding adolescence. Some of these parents have expressed an interest in providing support for Family Life Education in their local schools, an extra benefit that we hadn't really expected in a community with the highest teen birth rate and most conservative school board in the county.

Our work with parent groups in the Anglo community has also been encouraging. I'm told that we are much more successful than other agencies in that at least we get parents to attend our presentations! Our focus is on parents of 10-15 year olds and we utilize the efforts of volunteer facilitators trained by the Center for Early Adolescence which is a national center located at the University of North Carolina. In addition to our use of volunteer peer facilitators, our project is somewhat unique in that we don't even try to form our own parent groups - we offer our services to PTA's and other already established community parent groups for free. The curriculum covers topics useful to any parent such as: disturbed vs. disturbing behavior, channeling

risk-taking behavior, developmental needs of adolescents, and how to communicate about sexuality within the family. Our professional staff, our attitude toward parent training is one of peer education and sharing resources that empower parents to deal with their own challenges in their own way. Our role as consultants to youth-serving professionals takes on a similar attitude, with CCAP staff offering information and resources on adolescent sexuality, development, communication about sexuality, and the content and implementation of human sexuality/family life education in the schools. We held our first formal teacher training workshop for high school teachers of family life education topics a couple of days ago and followed up with our annual Resource Round-Up for youth-serving professionals. And we have been talking with the county department of education about more extensive teacher education for the future.

Our newest project is in the area of after-school programs for young adolescents which we see as primary prevention of a host of different adolescent problems including not only pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease, but also substance use, school drop-out, and others. We're in the needs assessment stage right now, but will eventually offer training to agencies involved in after-school programs and will provide some seed money for the implementation of a model after-school program sometime next year.

Finally, we come to what I spend most of my time doing, and that is educating teens about sexuality. So, what do we teach teens in our effort to prevent unintended pregnancy? Although we cover reproduction, birth control and sexually transmitted diseases, we are most often called upon to cover topics such as: sexual decision-making (What is a good decision? What are good decision-making skills? What pressures do teens face when making decisions about sex?); values and goals clarification (What is important to me? What do I want out of my life? How will I go about getting what I want? How does what I do now affect my plans and goals? How does sexuality fit into my values and goals? How would an accidental pregnancy and/or parenthood right now affect my plans?); communication skills (Assertiveness in getting my feelings across and expressing my needs. How to approach parents about touchy subjects. How people communicate nonverbally. Important topics to discuss before making the decision to become sexually active.); sexuality and sex roles (Defining sexuality as more than sexual intercourse. How people sometimes act differently and are treated differently because of their gender. And how we have certain expectations of people based upon their sex.); the impact of the media on sexual beliefs and attitudes (The media as a sex educator with a very distorted perspective of "normal" sexual behavior and human relationships. Being an informed media consumer); and the most requested topic, teen pregnancy (Discussion of local and national data on the incidence of unintended teen pregnancy, some reasons why it happens, some of the consequences, and how to prevent it. Male responsibility is strongly emphasized as is the effect that it often has on relationships and future goals).

I am sometimes asked, "Why don't you just tell the kids to say no to sex?" And there is a growing movement to promote chastity education, usually in conjunction with other information about human sexuality, but not always. At CCAP we agree that too-early sexual involvement and certainly, too-early pregnancy and parenting often leads to serious trouble. So we activley encourage teens to wait...but we know that not everyone is going to take our advice. And how can we blame them? They live in the same society we do, where sexual involvement is romanticized in the media and where sex outside of marriage is commonplace. They're just trying to be like us! Whoever said that "immitation is the sincerest form of flattery" would probably get their mouth washed out with soap today. We must treat children and teenagers with the respect due any human being, and as youth-serving professionals we can only hope to help them by attempting to look at their behavior from their perspective. Yes, we should teach children how to say "no." But it's unrealistic to think that they're going to say "no" everytime that we want them to say it. They deserve the education and the opportunities that will allow them to be knowledgeable about and skillful in the other alternatives as well.

We know that our type of one, two or even the occassional six session mini-series presentations to youth won't have much of an impact on teen pregnancy without other support from the community. So we strive to be role models for classroom teachers, counselors, school nurses, administrators, parents and other youth servers who deal with the teens on a daily basis. And we have seen positive results of our efforts when the teens that we talk to go to these adults for more information and guidance or make their first visit to the local community clinic. CCAP's educational programs are only a part of the solution. It is the combined efforts of the community that will prevent unintended adolescent pregnancy. Together we can make a difference!

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